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Methodism in 1791 & 1891

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R. J.

# METHODISM

IN 1791 AND 1891.

BY G. STRINGER ROWE.

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G. S. R.

*Headingley College,*

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## Methodism in 1791 and 1891.

NOT we only, but multitudes beyond our borders, are looking back, with deep interest, to the scene which closes the long, devoted life of John Wesley. For ourselves, we would give obedient heed to the counsel; "Remember them that had the rule over you, which spake unto you the word of God; and, considering the issue of their life, imitate their faith."—(Heb. xiii. 7, R.V.) It is upon the "issue"—the going out—of a great life that our eyes are fixed. To one feature only of that closing scene do I now specially point.

For above fifty years this good man has been "in labours more abundant," with the clear confidence that he is sent to do a work for God. That confidence has never faltered; and now, as he looks back upon his course, and sees how great a harvest has been gathered in, his soul is filled with the strong assurance that God has Himself owned and helped the work. The guidance and control of it are dropping from his hands; but he fears nothing. He speaks for the now large band of faithful ones who were yoke-fellows with him in the holy service, and cries, "The best of all is, God is with us." He passes; but the work endures; for God is in it.

Brethren, whether later Methodism has been faithful or not in carrying out that work, one thing is certain beyond dispute, that the verdict of history confirms the witness of the dying Wesley, that Methodism was of God, whose hand was seen in all its course. It is that testimony which reaches us from Wesley's lips to-day. It is at the same time the measure of our confidence and the test of our fidelity, as we ask ourselves, Can we take up the same cry? Has Methodism been true to the trust committed to it, I will not say by Wesley, but by the Lord? "Other men laboured, and we have entered into their labours." Have we stood firm to the same truth of the Gospel? Have we wrought in the service of the Gospel on the same principles and with the same aims? Have we accepted it as our

mission and made it our supreme aim "to spread Scriptural holiness through the land?"

These questions are not to be answered lightly, and, least of all boastfully. But, so far as matter for the answer lies ready to our hand, let us not fail to use it. Thus we thankfully affirm that Methodism to-day, in all its branches, shows results that cannot be of man. Looking on its vast growth, only an enmity blinded by bigoted prejudice could hesitate to say: "This is the Lord's doing, and it is marvellous in our eyes." And let us hasten to acknowledge, in most profound humility, that in nothing is it more marvellous than this, that it has been accomplished by agency for the most part so feeble, and often so unfaithful. But we should be sinfully ungrateful indeed did we not with great thankfulness magnify the grace of the Lord, the Head of the Church, in that Methodism has been kept loyal to His truth, and is loyal to-day to the form of doctrine which it was called into existence to teach and to defend. That unbroken continuity of doctrine is, I fear not to declare, one of the most notable phenomena in the history of modern Christianity. From our pulpits, in uninterrupted series of witness, there has sounded out, unfaltering, the word of a free, and full, and present salvation; a salvation by faith only in the atoning death of the Lord Jesus Christ; a divinely attested salvation; a salvation unto all righteousness and true holiness.

In saying this, I know well that there are those who deride Methodism because its creed has not changed with the times, and has refused to let itself be moulded by prevalent fashions of thought, and to be dictated to by the popularly enthroned philosophy of the hour. Where such critics condemn, we thankfully see occasion for our most devout praise; and we reverently believe that no hand but the hand of the Master Himself could have steered the Methodist Churches on their steady and unswerving course of faith and teaching through the changing winds and shifting currents of the last hundred years. As we seem to gather about the death-bed of him who, under God, was our founder, we are one in this full, undoubting assurance, that, without change in a single particular, the Gospel as he preached it is the Gospel, the only Gospel, of salvation to us, and to the whole world.

Yet, while Methodism, in its belief and witness, has remained unchanged, it has been ready to meet the requirement of altered conditions and circumstances by important modifications of its own organization, and of its forms and methods of action.

In pointing out this fact, I am reminded that this memorable anniversary brings out into special prominence one most important particular, in which we are accused of having revolted from the solemn charge of the dying Wesley. Those who use this accusation as a favourite weapon in their active attack upon Methodism, seem to persuade themselves that they serve their purpose by maintaining that we have been unfaithful to our founder, in that we have sought and made for ourselves a church existence separate from the Church of England. There surely could not be a more fitting occasion than the present for looking at this charge, and giving to it the decisive answer which the facts of the case readily supply.

Extracts have been diligently culled from Wesley's writings in proof that he was himself a devoted member of the Church of England, and that he did, to the end of his life, in every possible way, forbid, denounce, and condemn the separation of the Methodist societies from the Church. Now, these things are published and industriously circulated as if they had been concealed or forgotten; and they have been affirmed in a tone and manner which seemed to imply that there had been a conspiracy to keep them out of sight. The fact is, all the materials used for this charge have always been made openly known in the published writings and sermons of John Wesley, and in the printed Minutes of the Conference. No one has denied them. No sane person *could* deny them; no true Methodist need wish for a moment to do so.

Let the patent facts be frankly accepted. Wesley was throughout his life a devoted and enthusiastic Churchman. He was an ordained clergyman of the Church. In his early manhood he was an exceedingly high churchman, an extreme ritualist. Eleven years after his ordination, it was alleged against him, that he (1) Rigidly excluded all dissenters from the holy communion, until they first gave up their faith and principles, and submitted to be re-baptized by him. (2) Roman Catholics were received by him as saints. (3) He endeavoured to establish and enforce confession, penance, and mortification; mixed wine with



water at the Sacrament; and appointed deaconesses in accordance with what he called the Apostolic Constitutions. He neither could deny these allegations, nor had the smallest wish to do so. They were unquestionably true. But those who continually repeat these things ought, in mere honesty, to state the further fact, that this description belongs to the period in Wesley's career in which, by his own declaration, he was himself still unconverted, and in entire ignorance of the way of salvation; and that he lived to abandon and repudiate the extreme views which he once held. In after years he freely acknowledged that he had been a very high churchman, but he added that, since then, he had been well beaten with his own staff.\*

His loving loyalty to the Church, however, remained unshaken; and he did, by conversation, letters, pamphlets, sermons, and in his Yearly Conferences, protest that Methodists must never separate from the established Church: and he predicted all manner of disaster if any such separation should be attempted. Now, it is quite characteristic of the ecclesiastical school which is most severe in its denunciation of Methodism for departing from Wesley's solemn charge, that it should take the position it does in this matter. Their mediæval proclivities dispose them to look at the subject as the founding of a *religious order*, in the ecclesiastical sense of the term, bearing some analogy to those instituted, say, by St. Francis of Assisi, or St. Dominic, who bound their several confraternities by their own fixed and rigid *rule*, from which, in all following time, there could be no departure.

Now, while Wesley was, in no ordinary degree, endowed with organizing power, he did not—and this has been often pointed out—devise a definite plan and form for the Methodist Societies, and then proceed to mould and fix them accordingly. His whole course, after his conversion, had been an obedient waiting upon the Divine guidance, holding himself ready to take such steps as the manifest requirements of his work demanded. Thus, as the years went on, he, always strongly affirming his loyalty to the Church of England, became more and more irregular, simply because, without such irregularity, his evangelistic work would have been hindered, or altogether

\* In 1785 he writes; "The *Uninterrupted Succession* I know to be a fable, which no man ever did or can prove."

arrested. Thus he found himself, again and again, compelled to take positions, which if he could have seen them beforehand, he would have declared to be impossible. His history, which is really the history of Methodism up to that time, was one of steady, well considered advance along the line marked out by the exigencies of the work in hand. But our critics declare, in effect, that this line of steadily progressive development was broken off for ever when Wesley died: that the stream which had till then flowed with quickening course and swelling volume, ought to have been then frozen into motionless fixity. They insist that the form of the work as he left it, must thenceforth remain unchanged; and that, with his death, it lost all the vital power which had made it quick to adapt itself to the peremptory requirements of circumstances and events. Such a position, once examined, becomes incapable of defence. They who try to hold it, exalt Wesley to a height on which his most enthusiastic admirers and followers would shrink from placing him. They would make his word of higher authority than those plain leadings of the Lord Himself, which he had made it his one business faithfully to obey.

Still, what is to be said about Wesley's frequent, strong, even vehement protests against separation from the Church? Surely this; that their frequent repetition, and the strong words in which they were expressed show plainly the incontestable fact that he felt himself more and more unable to resist the growing tendency in that direction. It is impossible to read his later utterances on this point, and the declarations made to the same effect by one Conference after another, without seeing that this was really the case. Had there not been pressing and growing cause for alarm, these perpetual warnings would be unaccountable.

How far had Wesley himself given impetus to the movement, against the further advance of which he earnestly protested? He had gone very far indeed in the direction of nonconformity; and if he could not see that the principles on which he had so acted were likely to be used for pushing further on in the same direction, it was strange indeed that a man so clear-sighted in everything else should have been blind in this particular. And if he had been afflicted with this special blindness, there were friends close at hand to warn him of that which was alarmingly clear to



them. His brother Charles, a more rigid if not a more fervent churchman, gave him up at last as hopeless, and told him roundly that he was a dissenter. What had he done to bring upon himself this terrible accusation? Believing that, as a presbyter, he was, according to the New Testament, as much a bishop as anybody, he had proceeded to ordain preachers to the full office of the ministry by the laying on of his hands, because the work in Scotland required ministers having authority to administer the sacraments. He went much further. He ordained Dr. Coke, already a Church clergyman, to be a Bishop, having authority to go and superintend and organize the Methodist societies in America. I leave altogether untouched the question as to how far, on his own principles, he was justified in doing this. It is sufficient for my present argument to affirm that, had it been his object, which it most certainly was not, to make a defiant demonstration of rebellion against the law and order of the Church, it would have been impossible to devise a way in which he could have done it more effectually. While so much is said now about the unwisdom of the Church of England in thrusting Methodism out of her doors, it is very difficult to see how she could continue to house a son, who, while warmly protesting his affection for her, held himself free to set aside her order and authority, and never showed any sign of repentance for what he had done. When Wesley put his hands on the heads of John Pawson, Thomas Hanby, and Joseph Taylor, *he himself, if he did not actually separate Methodism from the Church, made that separation inevitable.*

Let us see how he describes his own position. In the year before he died he says, after stating how he had felt obliged to disregard Church order:—"All this is not separating from the Church. So far from it, that, whenever I have opportunity, I attend the Church service myself, and advise all our societies so to do. Nevertheless, the generality even of religious people naturally think I am 'inconsistent.' And they cannot but think so, unless they observe my two principles. The one, that I dare not separate from the Church, that I believe it would be a sin to do so; the other, that I believe it would be a sin *not to vary* from it in the points above mentioned. I say, put these two principles together; first, I will not separate from the Church;

yet, secondly, in cases of necessity, I will vary from it; and inconsistency vanishes away. I have been true to my profession from 1730 to this day."

As we watch the delicate process by which he thus satisfies himself of his own consistency, we may well rejoice that his godly zeal as an evangelist was too much for his theory as an ecclesiastic: and we will thank God continually for that inconsistency without which Methodism would most assuredly have been strangled in the birth. The fact is, that, while he clung to the idea that Methodism must always remain a society within the Church, he took every step required for its separate existence. It has been wittily said of him, that he was as a man who rows a boat, having his face turned in exactly the opposite direction to that in which he is going.

When Methodism came afterwards to be built up as a Church in itself, the whole structure was raised on foundations which were laid by John Wesley. As long as he lived, the deep and loving veneration in which he was held, and the absolute personal authority which he exercised, sufficed, though not without much difficulty, to hold in check the strengthening demand on the part of the societies for an independent existence. Many of his older preachers shared his convictions and feelings in this matter, and strove to carry them out. But there were thousands of the people, and many of the preachers, who had no such convictions, and could not be made to understand them. How could they assume a dutiful reverence for a Church to which they owed nothing? Nay, all they knew of it was, that it denounced and persecuted them, and drove them from the Table of the Lord; while, from its pulpits, generally, they heard no word of that Gospel which had brought them light and life. On the other hand, here were good men, of saintly life and devotion, who had been the messengers of God to the people, had sought them out with untiring persistence, and had recovered them from their wanderings; nay, more, had gathered them into lovingly tended flocks. Were not these men, to all intents and purposes, their ministers and pastors? They could not be made to see that they needed any others; and certainly they wished for none.

Many illustrations might be given of the embarrassing difficulty in which Wesley found himself, pressed on the one side by the

development and conditions of his work, and on the other by his Church principles. Let one suffice just now, and it is the more significant historically as it occurs in his own native Epworth, just after he had entered his 86th year. He thus writes: "Mr. Gibson (the Rector) read the prayers with seriousness, and preached a plain, useful sermon: but I was sorry to see scarce twenty communicants, half of whom came on my account. I was informed, likewise, that scarce fifty persons used to attend the Sunday Service. What can be done to remedy this sore evil? I fain would prevent the members here from leaving the Church; but I cannot do it. As Mr. Gibson is not a pious man, but rather an enemy to piety, who frequently preaches against the truth, and those that hold and love it, I cannot, with all my influence, persuade them either to hear him, or to attend the sacrament administered by him. If I cannot carry this point even while I live, who then can do it when I die? And the case of Epworth is the case of every Church where the minister neither loves nor preaches the Gospel; the Methodists will not attend his ministrations. What then is to be done?"

Who can say after this that Wesley did not see distinctly the rising of the tide, against which his "consistency" forced him to protest? In very many places besides Epworth the same state of things existed; and the feeling which has been described was wide-spread. It suppressed itself with difficulty out of purely personal consideration for the revered leader; but it was wholly unconvinced; and when he passed away, it refused to be repressed any longer. The four years immediately following his death were, for this reason, years of great peril. But the crisis was safely passed, and the unavoidable step was taken which began to give to Methodism the position of an independently existing Church. I say this step was unavoidable: and it was so, except at the certain cost of letting the great Methodist work fall into a number of weak and disconnected fragments.

But we are told that since then the circumstances of the case are greatly changed. The age of the Church's irreligion and indifference has passed away; and she does not hesitate to express her sorrow that Methodism was ever driven from her fold. We acknowledge with unmixed thankfulness the revival of godly earnestness in the Church of England; but when it is

urged that the Methodists should return and enrol themselves as members of that Church, we answer that it is too late. The question has passed beyond the purview of practical Church politics. And this for many reasons, of which I will specify only two.

In the first place, the Church of England has not room enough for Methodism. If we take into the account Methodism throughout the world, the act of transfer would involve the impossible process of the less including the greater. But if the proposal be limited to the United Kingdom, still it is true,—there would not be room. Can anyone seriously believe that any but a small part of our Church machinery could be brought into gear with the older ecclesiasticism? The rest would fall out of use. Is it conceivable that the manifold activities of Methodism could bear the transfer without being cramped at all points, and in a large measure arrested altogether?

In our eyes the unity of the Lord's disciples is as beautiful and necessary a thing as in the esteem of any; and it is the traditional spirit of Methodism to recognise with all thankfulness the claims of that unity on the ground of a common faith, wholly irrespective of diversities of form and Church distinctions. To that spirit we seek to remain faithful. But, in any conditions at present within view, the gain of a union of uniformity would be immensely outweighed by disastrous loss in the one great mission of the universal Church, the supreme work of the world's salvation. And it must be confessed that the world has sometimes been called to witness a zeal for unity which has occupied itself with the assertion of a Church uniformity, while supplying but little evidence of that oneness of a loving fellowship which, by the Lord's own declaration, is to demonstrate a common life in Him.

There is only one other reason that I think it necessary now to advance for our finding it, in any conditions that have yet arisen, impossible to so much as entertain the question of reunion. And I do this without a trace of ill-will, or any spirit of hostility whatever. Without presumption I may affirm that my knowledge enables me to speak very confidently on behalf of all the Methodist Churches; and thus I say to the Established Church:—We do not think lightly of your invitation. For all there is in it of Christian love, we thank God, and we are grateful to you. We do not pass ungraciously by your opened door, nor find it

hard to say with all our hearts, "Peace be upon this house." But as your home now is, it can never be our home. There are preliminary hindrances to our entrance which we cannot pass over; and we have no reason to suppose that you would be willing to remove them. Methodists will never acknowledge any priesthood save that which belongs to all believers in common; and they are no more able to perceive than you are able to prove the existence, or the need, of an uninterrupted channel of apostolical appointment for the continuance of a valid Christian ministry.

Need I repeat that this is said without bitterness, without uncharitableness? If I had said less, I could not have put our case fairly. Had I wished to retaliate for the attacks which, though in lessening number, have never ceased to be made upon us, I could have said very much more, and have supported it by overwhelming force of evidence. But, whatever cause our history may show for resentment, all such feeling would be sinfully out of place to-day. Yet, so much is continually said on the other side, and we have so formed the habit of going on with our work, making no reply, that when an occasion like this demands a review of our historical position, it seems to me to be necessary to speak, and to speak clearly.

For us Methodists, the uppermost question in our hearts to-day must be, How shall we be faithful to the trust which has been committed to us? Through the perspective of a century we see all the lines of our Methodist history meet in one life, the issue of which we watch with reverent interest. As the dying saint forgets himself in the cause to which his long life has been devoted, so our thoughts pass from the man to the great work which he had led. The leader falls: but the work, without pause or interruption, goes on and extends.

The words of Wesley's own birthday hymn bear now a great historical significance, of which no thought entered his mind, as he joyfully sang:—

O the fathomless love, that has deigned to approve  
And prosper the work of my hands!  
With my pastoral crook I went over the brook,  
And, behold, I am spread into bands.

Who, I ask in amaze, Hath begotten me these?  
And enquire from what quarter they came.

My full heart it replies, They are born from the skies,  
And gives glory to God and the Lamb.

The Methodist stock has put forth great branches, and distinct Churches have grown, forming their own peculiar order about some central principle which they felt called to assert with special emphasis. These several bodies, thanks be to God! dwell in perfect peace and love with one another. Whether they may come to be blended into actual corporate unity, is a question which must be of intense interest to all true Methodists, whatever difference of judgment there may be as to the possibility of it, or the means by which it might be brought about.

In the Western world these Churches have had a growth as wonderful in its vigour as in its rapidity. And in great English speaking populations they flourish in lands which in Wesley's days were all but unknown. The fruits of Methodist Mission enterprise have been garnered, and are now being reaped, in all parts of the world. All this we recognize with great thankfulness: but we must needs watch with the most concern the state and the history of Methodism in later years, and at the present time, in our own land. If we judge of recent growth and progress by comparison with that made in the closing decades of the last century, there may seem reason for discouragement. But the difference cannot be understood at a glance, nor be explained by a word. Let it be remembered that some conditions of the work as it was done in Wesley's days are for ever gone. Wheresoever he and his preachers preached the Gospel of the grace of God, they startled and moved the people with a new thing. In whatever place they stood up to deliver their fervent message they could reckon upon commanding either eager attention or fierce opposition; but indifference they hardly ever found. They worked in virgin soil, and, for a long time, held the field alone. The very success of Methodism destroyed some of the conditions and circumstances of its early progress. For that success is registered not only, and not chiefly, in its own growth, but in the gracious quickening of all other Churches throughout the land. Warm Christian zeal is no more the peculiarity of one, but belongs to all. The workers are multiplied everywhere; and the harvest is no longer gathered by a few, but is divided among the many. For all this we devoutly thank God. The Gospel of Christ is still, as much as ever, "the power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth;"



but to-day the most enterprising evangelist would find it hard to discover a people in Great Britain, or in a large portion of Ireland, to whom his word would come with the surprise of novelty.

What then? Admitting these plain facts, and allowing them their full weight, shall we accept the answer as sufficient, and dismiss the matter from our serious enquiry? It is impossible. I hope there is no Methodist living who can persuade himself that we, as Churches, are doing all that we ought to do. Brethren, we are indeed in an evil case if we are ready to welcome any argument which will make us content with lack of the old power, and want of vigorous growth. We must abandon, for very shame, our claim to be in the succession of those holy men and women who, under Christ the Lord, had Wesley for their leader, if we are willing to wrap ourselves in slothful indifference when the call is still so loud for self-denying, self-giving toil on behalf of those for whom Christ died.

As we look back to the event of a hundred years ago, which marks an epoch, not in our own annals only, but in the calendar of universal Christendom; as we gather in the unearthly light of that chamber where the veteran evangelist passes, with songs on his lips, from his work to his reward; as we watch the thousands who crowd about his grave, weeping such tears of love as have rarely been wept for any man; and as we are thus brought into touch with the glorious work of salvation which had been done, and was then adorning with unlesened power and success, can we forbear to ask, What is the secret of it all? May we also know and use its spell? May we also wield its power? Is it, in all its mighty virtue to bless, for the end of *this* century as much as for the last? Beyond all doubt, all question, it is! And the secret is open to all who would know it. Harken to these early Methodists. There is one word often upon their lips. It is, in very truth, a watchword of the advancing host. Learn that, and you have learned the inner secret of the great revival. These Methodists speak, and teach, and sing, and testify concerning *experience*. They mean the truth of the Gospel of God, which had been buried in learned books, dead and embalmed in dry systems of divinity, locked up in lifeless creeds and lifeless forms, but now gushing forth quick, and free, and richly full, in the

testimony of hearts that know its power. Here is the spell of the preaching which, from end to end, roused the land.

And here let two plain facts be noted. It was this element in the Methodist preaching which was angrily branded as fanaticism, and brought down upon the preachers, from pulpit and press, unmeasured abuse and derision. And this also is true, that in the century which has just closed, prolific beyond all that preceded it in plans, methods, and enterprises of social reformation, no expedient has been discovered that can for a moment bear comparison in its beneficent results with the earnest, experimental, preaching of the Gospel. The people's heart, which goes untouched by the truth, however admirably taught, as long as it seems to them but a theory and abstraction, answers to the preaching of a divine salvation, which God's witnesses declare that men may now have, and may know it, and forthwith bring forth its fruits in righteousness and true holiness.

If this element be not an ever present and governing power in our Church life, and fellowship, and work, our Methodism ceases to be the Methodism of the past, and we forfeit our claim to the great inheritance left us by our saintly fathers, into whose labours we are unworthy to enter.

No time could be more impressively fitting than this to ascertain and acknowledge our position. The history of Methodism has shown throughout its course the upholding of a standard of truth which has not yielded to the clamour of creed-fashion:—God's eternal truth, among all shiftings, abiding evermore the same; and this together with a watchful readiness to adapt its forms and methods to the exigencies and opportunities with which it meets. Its doctrine unalterably one; its work pliantly free to answer the calls, and meet the claims, of changing times.

There are always certain spirits, possessed by a restless impatience, and naturally intolerant of all restraints of order, who will advocate change for the sake of change. From the counsels of such we may well pray, and pray earnestly, to be delivered. But to refuse to modify our plans and machinery for the better doing of the work of the Gospel would be to condemn and to violate the very genius of Methodism. Every chapter in its story, is the record of a step into larger liberty

of action, a modifying and adapting of its order for the more effective doing of the work of God.

But, in Church polity, there is no virtue nor gain in giving changed form to a dead mass. Let there be changes wisely made as they may be demanded in alert obedience to the Master's leading; but let us see to it that they are always the healthy movements of a living body, the movements of a life so warm and strong that it *must* go forth in action. How shall that life be secured? Here the physical illustration of the natural body fails. In it the members live because of the life of the body. In a Church, the members do not gain their life from the Church, how much soever it may be fostered thereby; but the Church lives just as its individual members are savingly joined to the Head, Christ Jesus. So the lesson comes home to each; *I* must be faithful. Each of us is called to be a centre of living work; but there is no living work done from dead centres.

Our service, it is true, will never reach the heroic proportions of the life of Wesley; and our gifts are far below the measure of those with which he was singularly endowed; but, my brethren, we can every one gain for ourselves the strong confidence which, having nerved him for lifelong service, filled his last hours with rejoicing peace—the confidence of a sinner fully saved through the atonement of the Lord Jesus Christ; the confidence of a servant, who, according to his own measure, has accomplished the service committed to him.

From tens of thousands of hearts has gone up in these last few days the aspiration breathed in our liturgy of song;

O may I triumph so, When all my warfare's past,  
And dying find my latest foe, Under my feet at last!

In that fervent desire we now solemnly join; and then, lifting our eyes from the scene, where our patriarch gathers up his feet, and, looking forth to that "glorious appearing" on which his dying eyes were fixed, our whole souls cry out;

O that each in the day of His coming may say,  
I have fought my way through:  
I have finished the work Thou gav'st me to do!